

Otto Demus

1902–1990

A personality such as Otto Demus will live in the memory of all those who have met him, but must escape the curiosity of all those who can merely read him. Some scholars, we know, offer little interest once we leave their writings: they *are* their work. With Otto Demus, the situation is reversed. He usually kept his own person out of his writings, with the exception of his passion for the visual in general and the artistic in particular, which comes through despite his matter-of-fact objectivity. He obeyed a rigid discipline of scholarship ever since, as a young man, he had to regret the flamboyant lack of responsibility of his teacher Strzygowski. His curiosity, in intellectual and human terms, presented a striking contrast to the limited range of topics he chose as objects of research. For those who knew him, he was the connoisseur in the old-fashioned sense: a man who lived with art and justified himself with knowledge.

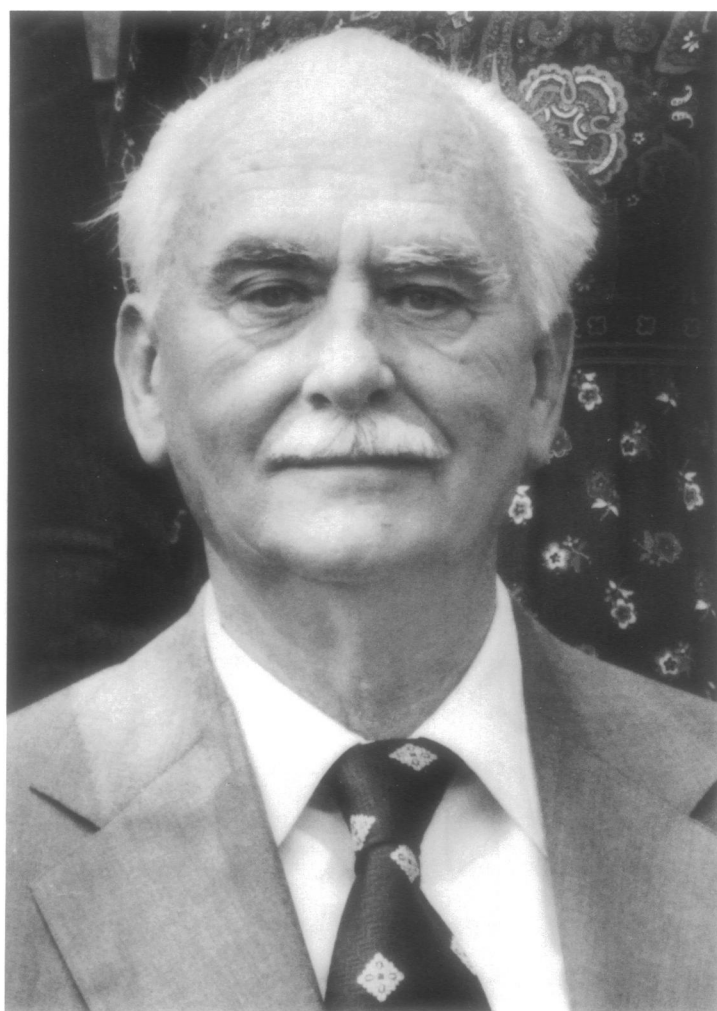
The superficial contradiction between his many interests and likings, on the one hand, and the unfailing loyalty to a few topics such as San Marco, Venice, on the other, reveals a singular relation of person and work, which I will try to describe in the following pages. I will never forget my last meeting with him, which took place (where else?) at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. The proposal came from him, since he wanted my assistance at a visit to a Mannerist exhibition presenting the Prague court of Emperor Rudolph. Though he faced great difficulties in walking, he kept himself upright with the same dignified composure I had always admired (but sometimes also regretted). His eyes no longer allowed him to read the labels beneath the objects with ease, but he knew every piece and objected often enough to the attributions and datings which I had to read to him. Afterwards, he took me to “his” beloved gallery

rooms in order to discuss some Renaissance paintings whose authorship he wanted to defend against current views.

I met Otto Demus, on a more personal level, for the first time at Dumbarton Oaks, when I still was in my student years and he had taken a short leave from his duties as president of Austria’s monument conservation service. He was approaching his sixties, but had not yet become professor at the University of Vienna. This circumstance, like many others, indicates a biography whose rhythm escapes the usual scheme of an academic career. The ruptures and turnovers of his professional life, counterbalanced by his steady insistence on continuity, reflect the violence of the first half of this century when individuals had to make unusual decisions in order to survive as moral beings.

Otto Demus was born near St. Pölten when the “kaiserlich und königlich” regime presided over by the old Emperor Franz Joseph still seemed as if it would last forever, but in fact was soon to fall apart. Hence, the broad view on the full pattern of European culture, which later on characterized the scholar, was an offspring of his early experience. The “East” was not somewhere, but present in all matters of life and art, as was also western Europe. His father, the physician Dr. Carl Demus, was killed early in the First World War, and the young boy soon had to contribute to his family’s income by giving private lessons. His striking modesty and self-control may have taken root in these years while he was still in school.

When he began studying, in 1921, at the University of Vienna, he had to make a difficult choice between two chairs of art history that had split into different institutions with hostile relations. One could study with Julius von Schlosser, Dvorak’s successor, or with Joseph Strzygowski, but not with both of them. Demus chose Strzygowski, who had



been a pioneer of Byzantine studies but would soon grow wild with pan-Germanic theories. His student took the best he could get and went his own way when he received his Ph.D., *summa cum laude*, in 1928.

The first result of his own studies is the book he published, together with Ernst Diez, in 1931 at Cambridge, Massachusetts: *Byzantine Mosaics in Greece: Hosios Lucas and Daphni*. The text is of a novel rigor in that it applied then recent methods of art history to Byzantine art and defined style as a factor of general importance. The color plates, for the first time, were taken from true photographs. The legend has it that young Demus carried the large glass negatives, on donkey's back, across the Greek countryside. The book appears to be an intermediary step in the study of the mosaics of San Marco in Venice, which was, and remained, the author's main concern. The small volume that Demus dedicated to this topic in 1935 established his reputation as a scholar who analyzed the "pictorial text" with philological precision. Chronology no longer was a pattern based on outside data, such as the topical catastrophes or consecration events of a church, but emerged from the study of the mosaics themselves. We have profited much from research of this kind and, indeed, sometimes tend to forget its importance when it was new.

Demus had entered the Austrian monument's service in the meantime and was acting on his own as a keeper (*Konservator*) of monuments in faraway Carinthia. Austria had become a very poor country, and the young scholar was left alone with the impossible task of recording the vast number of medieval monuments, especially wall paintings, which were also badly in need of restoration. Demus started a legendary activity and initiated a close collaboration with restorers, which forced him, initially at Maria Saal, to spend most of his time on fragile scaffolding that he had to organize with no money. He learned a lesson then which would prove fruitful for all his forthcoming "readings" of murals in East and West. But in turn he also changed the status of restoration work, which no longer remained the domain of personal taste on the part of the practitioner.

After six years of hard work in the province, he was called back to Vienna where the main office of the Austrian Protection of Fine Arts and Monuments wanted his presence in 1936. One year later, his "Habilitation," being the admission to teaching, took place at the university, where Hans Sedlmayr had succeeded Julius von Schlosser. Thus his

double career of keeper of monuments and lecturer of art history (not just Byzantine art history, be it said at the first moment) seemed well on its way. But Hitler's annexation of Austria in 1938 changed this promising situation completely. Academic freedom was soon a forgotten idea. The new authorities went so far as to request from art historians an active part in the confiscation of Jewish art possessions. There was also talk of a Balkanic Institute, for which Hitler needed scholars like Demus.

A man in his situation could either cooperate or stay clean and quit. When Demus, in the spring of 1939, traveled to Sicily in order to take part in the Byzantine Congress, he never returned to Austria but emigrated to England where he arrived, as he told me, without even having a valid passport. The economic circumstances in England were far from favorable, and there was no means to compensate for the loss of his position and salary in Austria. But the human response impressed the newcomer so deeply that he adopted another, Anglophile identity. Eventually he was able to work as a librarian at the Warburg Institute, which had then been recently re-created in London with the library from Hamburg and some exiles (even from Austria), and he also taught at the Courtauld Institute of Art.

The real significance of Demus' new life, however, was the intellectual experience, in which the encyclopedic "Warburg people" were the dominating influence. After the big exodus in the 1930s, any such experience was restricted to England and the United States, with refugees acting, with their grateful idealism, as the driving force. Demus added new views and new questions to his research on style, as is evident from the volume *The Mosaics of Norman Sicily*. The book, however, appeared as late as 1949, since its author needed post-war facilities for access to the monuments of Sicily.

The lasting achievement of his London years is the slender volume of 1947, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium*. This elegant essay has become a classic in its field. It made use of then recent iconology and had a compelling argument that does not suffer from such objections as its lack of usefulness for the needs of daily research. As a synthesis of Byzantine aesthetics, it aroused wide interest in the humanities of its time. Byzantine art reemerged from the shadow of the exotic as an integral part of European culture.

When the war was over, Austria was in urgent need of scholars who had not lost face in the game.

Otto Demus was an obvious choice when, in 1946, the monuments service was reorganized. He soon agreed to serve as president of the newly created Bundesdenkmalamt. It was no easy task to start from scratch. Demus came home, but there were few people who would welcome the reappearance of a person wearing white shirts. There was no time left for research, since other needs had priority. Demus faithfully saw to his duties and remained in office for almost twenty years, though he must have received many other attractive offers. His idealism was such that he had even forgotten to ask for favorable conditions, as he once confided to me ruefully. Once in office, there could be no improving of his personal situation, as state administrations are known to behave. There was, however, the tiny house in the Belvedere gardens, which was given to him at the time. He lived in this house, with all its lack of space for his books and with the traffic noise beyond the baroque beauty of the gardens, until his death. The visitor to his house had to make an appointment for a precise hour, since the host would meet him at the closed gate of the gardens.

There were no books for quite some time to come, but there were short articles that had a lasting effect on the field. In my view, Demus was the master of the short essay, which set him free from the demands of a "serious" book with its scholarly apparatus (though he fulfilled his duties in such books with an unfailing devotion). An example of this kind is the study on the oldest Venetian *Gesellschaftsbild* which is a primer for a topic central to Venetian art. It appeared in the first volume of the *Jahrbuch*, published in 1951 by the newly founded Österreichische Byzantinische Gesellschaft, another area of his activities in conjunction with Herbert Hunger.

Dumbarton Oaks, in those years, exerted an influence on international scholarship that cannot be overrated. This was due partly to its attraction for a group of famous exiles, partly to its liberal attitude toward the whole range of medieval studies, which excluded any narrow parochialism. From 1949 on, Demus could at times escape from his usual professional life when he received a series of invitations. He would write on Austrian art at Vienna and on Byzantine art at Dumbarton Oaks. This situation left him with the need for a bridge between the one and the other area of studies. San Marco, Venice, therefore, was a welcome topic. The early book no longer represented the competence its author had acquired in the meantime.

We would have expected Demus to write a second book on the topic of the Venetian mosaics. In fact, in 1960 he published a book that has everything (history, architecture, and sculpture) about San Marco, but nothing on the mosaics. This surprising choice may have been made for a number of reasons and, above all, answered the need for first laying a solid base by writing a new handbook with all the information that was totally lacking in the 1935 monograph. But Demus also may have understood that he needed a thorough reexamination of the Venetian mosaics on the spot, which could not be accomplished without scaffolding, and thus would require much money. As a matter of fact, he waited another fifteen years until this situation, handled as a Dumbarton Oaks project on an unprecedented scale, was ready, and he himself had gone into retirement. One wonders what to admire more, the patience with which he waited for the right moment or the confidence with which he structured his life as if he could control a program.

His career, however, did not run smoothly, and his personal life even less so. He had reached his sixties when Karl Maria Swoboda retired from the University of Vienna. He may have had a part in the state's decision to restore the two former chairs for Swoboda's succession, since he would not have wanted to represent art history as a whole as was the custom in German-speaking universities. Indeed, he insisted on Otto Pächt as his colleague when he was offered the position himself, and firmly resisted the reappointment of Hans Sedlmayr, whose behavior in the Nazi years was still a vivid memory. Pächt, ironically, was a former student of the other Vienna "Lehrkanzel," and the two men, though only a month apart in age, had not even met during their student days. Pächt also had emigrated to England but had stayed there and established a name as a "manuscript man" in the venerable halls of the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

"The two Ottos," as they were called, had somewhat different careers as teachers when they were appointed in January 1963 and resided for a decade in their respective offices at the far ends of the Vienna institute. Demus, who for the two following years still served at the Bundesdenkmalamt, taught medieval and Byzantine art. Pächt, who had never won a position of public prestige before, with exploding energy offered the theoretical layout of the entire field, which met with fashionable excitement. Demus, free of any resentment, per-

formed at the other's side with grace and the noble understatement that was his second nature. He seemed to be an English gentleman of the old school who for mysterious reasons had ended up in Vienna. The only objection he ever raised against the twin Otto was the latter's age, Pächt being just one month his senior, which, according to Austrian law, permitted him to retire one year earlier.

Despite his regular duties as a teacher and as a *Vorstand* of the institute and despite his further activities as an adviser on restoration at home and abroad, he again found the time for producing a substantial book. His *Romanesque Wall Painting*, which was first published in German in 1968, is a Demus book as distinct as a book can be. At first sight, it looks unpromising since it adopts (or creates?) an established type of a Hirmer book, consisting of an introduction, a corpus of full-page plates, and a catalogue of monuments. But Demus took quite seriously a task that others would have dismissed as mere routine, and traveled on his own across Europe, from England through Spain, etc., in order to "know" for sure what European painting was in that age. He therefore was able to evaluate and describe every example from autopsy, including its present condition, and took a personal interest in the photo campaign. The result has that kind of discrete perfection that serves the reader but does not serve an author's vanity.

His fame, nevertheless, was firmly established by then, and he earned the prizes and memberships that a scholar of his standing can collect like trophies: the Prix Schlumberger, the order of Commendatore and the memberships of the British Academy, the Ateneo Veneto, and the Society of Antiquaries, to mention just a few. Demus also delivered the Slade lectures at Cambridge and the Wrightsman lectures at New York University, which were published as a book in 1970. *Byzantine Art and the West* finally makes the big confession which the "traveler between two worlds" had in mind all his life. Byzantium and the West not only did coexist in the author's mind, as he made sure, but were a reality for each other, which is attested by their art. Demus had to admit that their exchange, in art, was a one-way traffic which everybody labels "Byzantine influence on the West." He carries the argument as far as it can possibly be taken since it relies on visual means alone and needs a subtlety of observation, on the author's side, which only a fervent missionary is willing to

carry through. The only way to proceed further in the future will be a discussion of the differences between the two cultures once such analogies, in art, are taken for granted.

Venice, to be sure, is a separate case. Even Byzantine artists were repeatedly called to Venice, and here they were understood, misunderstood (which is, anyway, the more productive behavior), and sometimes contradicted by their local followers. Venice is, if I may simplify things, Byzantium *in* the West. It is here that Demus, at an age when other biographies are exhausted, started the biggest scholarly adventure of his life. With the help of Dumbarton Oaks and with the untiring assistance of Irina Andreescu, who organized practical matters on the spot, to say the least, the cleaning of the San Marco mosaics began in the 1970s.

Demus was in his own seventies at the time, and he had known the church for most of his adult life. But he was ready to learn again from every bit of possible evidence when the mosaics were ready for close inspection of style and technique after being cleaned of their dust. He spent half of each year in Venice, the winter half to be sure, since the Venetian authorities would not disguise the church by scaffolding in the tourist season. I then joined him occasionally on the towering scaffolding, which he would climb up three times a day in the damp winter climate of Venice despite his precarious health. The energy he invested for years was supported by an enthusiasm that never left him.

I vividly remember a lively discussion he had with Ernest Hawkins, the British expert on mosaic restoration, high up in the eastern dome. Hawkins objected to Demus' reasoning with the emphatic exclamation: "Otto, mosaic cubes of this yellow were not used prior to the fourteenth century." The answer, no less emphatic, came: "Ernest, but think of style and look here what evidence I have." In the end, as we know today, he was right. The better results rely on the better statistics. What we call "style," whether one likes it or not, is based on a rich network of heterogeneous data when controlled by archaeological investigation. Demus, anyway, had a practical experience that few practitioners ever acquire in their lifetime.

The first triumph of the project was the discovery, in the eastern dome, of two distinct phases of mosaic work, the early one around 1100 and the second one almost a century later, after the collapse of part of the dome initiated a new campaign. It came as a surprise that the old Venetians

had been economic enough to keep what was left of the original mosaics and sometimes would just add new legs or a single piece of drapery to an existing prophet. This discovery changed the chronology Demus had established himself, but made everything that had happened during the decoration of the vast building, which lasted over two hundred years, fall into place. Demus was never too proud to change his earlier views whenever there was reason to change them, and began to write the "epos" of the largest mosaic ensemble still in existence.

The result, as everybody knows, is the monumental book published in 1983 by the University of Chicago Press in conjunction with Dumbarton Oaks, a book of several volumes of text and plates. The book has received spectacular prizes and the attention it deserves. It is a monument to its author's lifelong devotion to San Marco and also a monument to his scholarship. This mountain of information will serve many generations to come. I am grateful for this present occasion, which enables me at last to pay homage to an achievement that today would need a large *équipe* of young scholars for the double time Demus needed himself.

Demus, in his areas of study, might be called "the eye" of art history, if such a metaphor would not risk being understood as meaning to contrast eye and brain. There is still current contempt for the "image people" who do not work with "serious" sources and do not explain "real" history. But we are in a time of transition when the general interest in images, as mirrors not only of art but also of their time, is rapidly growing. The capacity for understanding visual structures and interpreting images—not with outside information but from within—was, anyway, one of the few achievements of the humanities in modern times. It happened in art history and cannot be discredited for the only reason that it fell into the ignorant or fashionable use of the large crowd. Demus knew the dangers in the game well enough to control his visual activity with all the available information on technique and conservation. This accumulated experience, used by his subtle sense of the artistic domain, properly speaking, became his real strength.

As to Byzantium, he represented one of two possibilities desirable for students of Byzantine art. He was the art historian by confession for whom Byzantine art was as interesting as was Western art even beyond the Middle Ages. With this profound

knowledge, he could judge from a vast repertory of experience when he studied Byzantine art. There is, on the other hand, the encyclopedic Byzantinist who uses art and archaeology as easily for his own purpose as he uses other sources. But there should not be art historians who, because of their narrow field of competence, lose self-confidence and eagerly take commissions from other people telling them what to do. Otto Demus was living proof of art history's own merits but (or because?), with all his quiet self-assurance, he did not claim to own the one and only truth.

When everybody praised the San Marco book, few people were aware that he was about to write yet another book. This time, he returned to another love of his youth, the medieval art of Carinthia, where he had served as a keeper of monuments for seven years. His study of the wooden carved and painted altarpieces of late gothic Carinthia may then already have been in the planning stage, judging from Demus' lifelong love for San Marco. Now, in his eighties, he had done everything else and could pick up the thread he may have left then. He drove to every site in his own car and collected notes and photographs at leisure. I love this confidence into his personal taste which cared little for the fashions and the latest credos of the academic market. It is obvious that Demus wrote the book for himself, while, at the same time, fulfilling a duty for a neglected "province" of art which needed, in his view, the loving care of a patient "geographer." The 750-page book has the title *Die spätgotischen Altäre Kärntens*. As is to be expected, it was in print when he died and therefore could be published, as he had written it, after his death. Few Byzantinists will ever even look at it, but many people will use it who are unaware of the existence of Byzantium.

Hans Belting